

NAPLES DAILY NEWS (FL)
9 May 1986

An Unfettered Press Vs. National Security

STAT

Media responsibility in dealing with matters of national security was a recurring topic in this week's symposium on terrorism presented by the Association of Former Intelligence Officers in Naples. Information leaks at the federal government level reported in the press have impeded our nation's intelligence activities even to the point of precluding covert action.

CIA director William Casey declined comment on why covert action was not used in Libya rather than military action which threatened civilians. Seminar participants could have little doubt, however, that our recent history of press leaks in Washington contributed to the decision not to use covert measures in our response to Libyan terrorism.

The press system of the United States is the most unfettered in the world. Our first amendment freedom, however, requires a sense of responsibility on the part of the media. Never has that responsibility better been demonstrated than in wartime when countless confidences were kept by our print and electronic media.

That same sense of responsibility has not been demonstrated in recent years when grave items of national security have been routinely broken to the public by the media.

Collier and Lee County media were commended by the large security force that accompanied CIA director Casey to Naples. The local press had known for weeks that Casey was coming. Because the director is on Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy's hit list, local print and electronic media agreed with the CIA not to publicize his visit in advance.

One TV Channel 20 (WBBH) reporter, however, chafed at a local CIA-requested restriction. Director Casey had refused to grant a press conference. He did agree, as a matter of courtesy, to meet briefly with the sponsors who picked up the tab for the intelligence seminar for the fourth year, the Naples Daily News and Palmer Communications.

The TV reporter balked and remained in the meeting without videotaping it. In his evening newscast, however, he editorialized about the incident at the end of his report with the slurring remark that Casey had sold himself to the Naples Daily News and to Palmer Communications.

Nothing is more confusing to the public than TV commentary and opinion superimposed on a news report. The growing need for press responsibility and professionalism must be extended to that practice if public confidence in media objectivity is to be earned.